

CHRISTOPHER J. LEE
26TH DISTRICT, NEW YORK

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HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITY

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

1711 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-5265

325 ESSJAY ROAD, SUITE 405
WILLIAMSVILLE, NY 14221
(716) 634-2324

1577 WEST RIDGE ROAD
GREECE, NY 14615
(585) 663-5570

<http://chrislee.house.gov/>

June 23, 2009

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Department of Veterans Affairs, Central Office
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I write to you today to express my deep concern with regards to the growing number of outstanding claims to be processed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.


This large backlog is the result of more than 722,000 current claims along with more than 172,000 appeals, totaling 900,000 claims to be processed, including 13,000 pending in New York State. In a recent appearance before the House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance, VA Deputy Undersecretary Michael Walcoff testified that the Department receives approximately 80,000 new claims each month. With the current backlog and this large influx of new claims, the nearly 900,000 claims could reach the one million mark by the end of summer.

This is unacceptable and needs to be addressed before the problem is just too large to solve. Our veterans deserve not only the best health care, but health care that is accessible and responsive. The average wait for a claim is more than 120 days, and veterans in my district have informed me they have waited more than a year for their claims to be processed. In these tough economic times, veterans waiting on their claims to be processed are forced to take extreme steps, including paying bills with credit cards.

While efforts to revamp the Department's electronic claims system are to be commended, our veterans cannot wait any longer. Our servicemembers returning from tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the nearly eight million veterans already enrolled in the VA health care system, deserve immediate care and timely claims processing. We have made a promise to care for our veterans, and we must meet this obligation.

I appreciate the burdens your agency must bear in this matter, and look forward to hearing from you on your plan to reduce this backlog and ensure accessible health care for our veterans.

Sincerely,



CHRISTOPHER J. LEE
Member of Congress